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Horse feeding recommendations

A balanced diet is crucial for horses' growth, performance, and overall well-being. It's not just about what you feed them but also when. Horses are natural grazers, spending up to 60% of their day eating small amounts often. Each horse has unique needs, so research your own horse's requirements. Consulting with a veterinarian is essential for personalized advice. In the wild, horses roam large areas, feeding on grass and other plants. Their digestive system is designed for this, so domesticated horses' diets should mainly consist of forage like pasture and high-quality hay. Horses turned out to graze usually don't need much hay, but during winter or droughts, it's necessary to supplement with hay. Free-feeding hay helps replicate their natural dietary rhythm and prevents colic. Concentrate can be added if forage alone isn't meeting nutritional needs, but many horses can thrive on pasture and hay without it. Discuss your horse's diet with a veterinarian before making any changes. When feeding concentrate, divide it into small meals throughout the day, ideally 4-6 times. Avoid large meals that can lead to digestive issues like colic. Limit grain-based concentrates to 0.5% of the horse's body weight per single feeding and maintain a consistent daily schedule. Changes in Diet Can Affect Horse Health Understanding Your Horse's Needs Each horse has unique needs based on its age, size, and activity level. Pregnant and lactating mares have different nutritional requirements compared to average adult horses. Feeding Chart for Horses by Age and Body Weight Adult Maintenance 1.5%–2% Mares in Late Gestation 1%–1.5% Mares in Early Lactation 1%–2% Mares in Late Lactation 1%–2% Young Horses Nursing, 3 Months 0% 2.5%–3.5% Weanling, 6 Months 0.5%–1% 2%–3.5% Yearling, 12 Months 1%–1.5% 2%–3% 18-Month-Old 1%–1.5% 2-Year-Old 1%–1.5% Working Horses Light Work 1%–2% 0.5%–1.5% Moderate Work 1%–2% 0.75%–1.5% Intense Work 0.75%–1.5% Feeding your horse a balanced diet requires regular, frequent meals throughout the day. It is recommended that you provide your equine friend with small portions on a daily schedule to meet their nutritional needs. To ensure you're giving them the best possible care, it's essential to consult with a veterinarian for personalized dietary advice. The key to a healthy horse lies in understanding its six basic nutrient categories: carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins, minerals, and water intake. While commercial feed manufacturers often balance these nutrients for us, it's crucial not to overlook the importance of providing fresh, clean water daily, ideally 24/7 if possible. A normal horse can consume anywhere from 5 to 15 gallons of water per day, depending on environmental factors like temperature, humidity, and activity level. To create a well-rounded diet, consider the following basic nutrient categories: carbohydrates (found in hay, grass, and roughage), proteins, fats, vitamins, minerals, and water. Each horse's needs are unique, influenced by their body mass, age, workload, and metabolic efficiency. The ability to read feed tags and understand your horse's nutritional requirements is a valuable skill. Carbohydrates make up the largest portion of a horse's diet and can be divided into two groups: structural (fiber) and non-structural (sugars and starches). Structural carbohydrates are found in roughage, like hay and grass, and can be digested due to the horse's intestinal tract design. The digestive process begins in the stomach and small intestine before entering the large intestine (hindgut). A horse's digestive system is made up of the cecum and colon, where microbes break down carbs from grass and hay into energy sources that can be absorbed by the horse. It's essential to feed good-quality hay that's free of mold and dust, with an ideal cut length and stage of maturity. Poorly cut hay can cause digestive issues like impactions. Overly mature hay has low nutritional value due to high lignin content, which is mostly indigestible for horses. Grains provide concentrated energy in the form of sugars and starches, but a horse's digestive system evolved to process roughage-based diets. Concentrates should be used only to supplement forage programs that can't meet nutritional requirements alone. A minimum of 1% body weight in forage (on a dry matter basis) is recommended; ideal is 1.5-2%. Feeding less roughage can lead to health issues like colic and ulcers. "Safety" feeds are marketed with high-digestible fiber, low sugars, and starches, using ingredients like beet pulp and soybean hulls. Feed tags often list average starch percentages, allowing owners to select feeds with low starch content for horses with special needs. Protein is a vital nutrient for body growth and maintenance, but its understanding among horse owners is limited. Proteins are broken down into amino acids that make up muscle, hair, and hooves. Amino acid sequences in proteins are highly specific; the amount of protein synthesized by the body is limited by the first amino acid to run out, which is lysine for horses. Improving protein quality without increasing total protein can be beneficial, as seen on horse feed labels where "added lysine" and additional percentages might be listed. This enhances protein quality without raising overall protein content in the feed. The amount of protein a horse needs is often misunderstood, with many believing that more protein equals more energy. However, proteins are actually difficult for horses to digest and convert into usable energy. Protein requirements vary based on age and workload, with growing horses needing more protein than mature horses, typically between 12 and 18 percent crude protein for proper growth. Horses in intense training or those producing milk also require more protein, while mature horses can thrive on lower protein levels, around 8 to 12 percent. Excess protein is broken down and excreted as urea, which can lead to respiratory issues. Forage is also a source of protein, with legume hays like alfalfa having higher protein content than grass hays. High-fat diets can be beneficial for certain horses, with fat being an easily digestible energy source. Commercial feeds often contain 2 to 4 percent fat, while some supplemented feeds can have up to 12 percent fat. When increasing fat in a horse's diet, it's essential to ensure other nutrients like protein, vitamins, and minerals are also sufficient. Vitamins are crucial organic compounds that enable important reactions in the body, and their presence is necessary for a horse to thrive. Vitamins can be categorized into two groups: water-soluble vitamins, which include B-complex vitamins like thiamine, and fat-soluble vitamins, comprising vitamins A, E, D, and K. Horses synthesize many necessary vitamins, so dietary supplementation is not always required for all vitamins, such as vitamin C, B-vitamins, and vitamin K, which is why these are often not listed on commercial horse feed tags. However, it's crucial to ensure the feed meets all vitamin requirements, as deficiencies can lead to health issues. Excessive intake of vitamins, especially fat-soluble ones, should be avoided, as it can cause toxicity. Water-soluble vitamins are typically excreted in urine, while fat-soluble vitamins accumulate in fat tissue and can reach toxic levels if overfed. A well-planned forage program combined with a balanced concentrate usually provides sufficient vitamins. Minerals, which are inorganic materials necessary for proper bodily functions, can also be found in supplements. Their requirements vary based on the horse's age, status, and workload. Commercial feeds are often formulated to meet these mineral needs, and additional supplementation may be beneficial in some cases, such as improving hoof strength with biotin, zinc, and copper. Nevertheless, excessive mineral intake can lead to toxicities or interfere with other mineral absorption. If a horse doesn't receive commercial concentrate, supplementing vitamins and minerals through ration balancers or free-choice loose salt-vitamin-mineral mixes may be necessary. Ration balancers provide essential vitamins, minerals, and protein at low feeding levels, while loose mixtures are more effective than salt blocks due to horses being inefficient lickers, and mineral blocks contain mostly salt with minimal mineral content. Horses kept on pasture and fed all-forage diets can benefit from this option. When giving a loose mix, horses typically consume between 1.5 to 3 oz per day. It's crucial to check the calcium:phosphorus ratio in commercial feeds and vitamin/mineral premixes, ensuring it's within the 1:1 to 2:1 range. High phosphorus levels relative to calcium can cause calcium to be pulled from bones into the bloodstream, which is less of a concern for grazing animals but more so for horses fed grains or commercial feeds lacking sufficient calcium supplementation. Even single grain types like oats can lead to an inverse calcium:phosphorus ratio if not supplemented with calcium. For working horses that sweat heavily and lose electrolytes, supplementing salt and additional electrolytes (like potassium) may be necessary, especially through a balanced electrolyte mix added to their grain mixture as needed. Determining Nutrient Intake is crucial for each horse, as requirements vary. Manufacturers provide feeding instructions on the feed tag to help buyers decide if it meets their horse's needs. Understanding these guidelines can help in selecting appropriate feeds based on deficiencies from your horse's pasture and hay consumption. The National Research Council (NRC) recommendations offer detailed nutritional requirements based on a horse's age, workload, and status. This resource allows you to input specific details about your horse and receive personalized dietary recommendations for macronutrients and vitamins/minerals, as well as the nutritional value of different feedstuffs. Your horse's dietary needs are being met through a specific feed or combination of feeds, taking into account the weight of each component. It's essential to note that this program operates in metric units, requiring all weights to be converted from pounds to grams and kilograms. Understanding "dry matter" content is crucial before formulating diets. For example, according to the NRC database, coastal bermudagrass hay has an average dry matter content of 87.1%. This means the hay typically contains 13% water and 87% other nutrients. Additionally, it has an energy density of approximately 1.87 Mcal/kg. To compare nutritional information accurately, considering the varying amount of water in different feedstuffs is vital. Hay usually contains around 10%-15% water, whereas fresh pasture may contain 70%-80% water, with only 20%-30% dry matter. A horse consumes about 2% of its body weight in dry matter daily, so it would need to eat significantly more pasture than hay to meet this requirement. For instance, if a 400 kg horse needs to consume 2% of its body weight in dry matter per day, and the hay is 87% dry matter, it would require approximately 9.2 kg of hay to achieve this. Using Coastal Bermudagrass Hay as a Diet for Horses: A Customizable Approach The recommended diet for horses consists of eating 2% of their body weight in dry matter of coastal bermudagrass hay. However, this may not be suitable for all horse types, such as those that require more intense exercise or are in different life stages. It is essential to note that the nutrient profiles provided can be customized using a database of feedstuffs and analyzing the nutritional content of individual feeds. To ensure a tailored diet, it is possible to work with a county Extension agent to have a forage or feed sample analyzed through a lab test. Once this information is obtained, the values in the NRC program can be modified by replacing them with the actual values from the report. This allows for a more accurate evaluation of the horse's diet and identifying any nutritional deficits. Commercial feeds provide feeding recommendations based on weight, age, activity level, or life stage, using guidelines from the NRC and nutrient databases. It is crucial to follow the feeding instructions on the feed tag to avoid dietary excesses or deficiencies. Selecting a feed that meets the horse's specific needs can be achieved by balancing nutrients without overloading on certain areas. For example, if a horse is lacking in protein but meeting most of its energy requirements, a higher crude protein content feed may be necessary. Conversely, if the horse seems deficient in digestible energy, a feed with added fat may be more suitable. A balanced feed that meets all nutrient needs without overloading on specific areas is also essential. Understanding equine nutritional requirements and applying knowledge in practice is vital to ensure optimal feeding practices. For further information on equine feeding programs, consult additional resources. hay types for horses include grass hays like timothy brome coastal Bermuda orchard grass teff and legumes such as alfalfa clover hay from acidic soils may be lacking in calcium and/or selenium oat hay can be used but needs to be harvested properly warm season grasses are low in starch sugars and fructans but may lack calcium For horses that have difficulty chewing or require a substitute for long-stem hay, forage-based cubes or pellets may need to be soaked in water to minimize the risk of choke. Total mixed rations and "complete" feeds with added concentrates have been developed for horses, offering advantages such as uniform quality, control over nutrient intake, suitability for horses with dental issues, reduced dustiness, and convenient storage. However, these feeds can increase the risk of choke and wood chewing, particularly when fed as the sole source of nutrition. To mitigate this, they should be provided in multiple smaller feedings or supplemented with forage, such as long-stem hay. Feeding long-stem hay alongside these products or dividing daily allotments into smaller portions can also help minimize boredom and wood chewing.

Feeding horse. Horse feeding time.